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*The story of the*  
**TWENTY-EIGHTH  
BATTALION**

BY J. H. BROWN



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*The*  
**STORY OF THE  
TWENTY-EIGHTH (NORTH-  
WEST) BATTALION  
1914 - 1917**

By  
**G. E. HEWITT.**

(This series of histories is written under the direction of and edited  
by Capt. T. G. ROBERTS of the Canadian War Records Office.)

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Lieut.-Col. ALEX. ROSS, D.S.O.

# The Story of the 28th (North-West) Battalion. SASKATCHEWAN.

Commanded by

Lieut.-Col. (now Brig.-Gen.) J. F. L. EMBURY, C.M.G.,  
formerly commanding 95th Saskatchewan Rifles, Canadian  
Militia, from Mobilization until the battle of Courcelette,  
and

Lieut.-Col. ALEX. ROSS, D.S.O.,  
formerly of 95th Saskatchewan Rifles, from the battle of Courcelette.

## IMPORTANT ENGAGEMENTS.

St. Eloi Craters, April, 1916; Hooge, June 6th, 1916; Courcelette (Somme),  
September, 1916; Vimy Ridge, April, 1917; Hill 70, August, 1917;  
Passchendaele, November, 1917.

“THE 28th Battalion throughout the fighting set a notable example of gallantry and endurance.” The words were penned by Lord Beaverbrook (“Canada in Flanders;” Volume II.), in his graphic description of the exploits of Canadian regiments in the agonising struggle for the craters of St. Eloi in April, 1916. Such an eulogy, coming from the Dominion’s first official war historian, pays splendid tribute to a very popular western battalion. It is indeed an appreciation well merited. From Kemmel Hill (September, 1915) to Passchendaele (November, 1917), the record of the 28th is one of fine achievement, a story to live in the annals of Canada’s role in the war.

It seems almost like delving into the past to tell of the origin of the 28th and to recount its early history. For one has to go back, not merely to the good old

## 2 THE STORY OF THE 28TH BATTALION.

Horse Show building in Winnipeg, but to the large cities and centres of Saskatchewan, where the integral parts of the unit first saw the light—and to those thriving twin cities of Port Arthur and Fort William whence a whole company of the original battalion came. It would be perfectly safe to say that every single militia unit in Saskatchewan was represented to some extent in the five companies which formed the original make-up of the 28th Battalion. (There was an extra or "base" company in those days). Moreover, it was a pretty safe bet that a man wearing the familiar 28th badge on his cap in the early months of 1915, hailed from Regina, Moose Jaw, Saskatoon, Prince Albert, Fort William, Port Arthur or the vicinity of those places—and one must mention Winnipeg, which city could claim its quota after the battalion's six months' residence in winter quarters there.

### ONE OF THE SIXTH BRIGADE.

The 28th was brigaded early in 1915 with the 27th (City of Winnipeg) Battalion, the 29th (Vancouver) and the 31st (Alberta). These units formed the 6th Canadian Infantry Brigade, the western hope of the 2nd Canadian Division—the "Iron Sixth."

In command of the Saskatchewan unit was Lieut.-Col. J. F. L. Embury, a prominent Regina counsel and officer of the Canadian Militia. No better choice could have been made. The colonel was a man's man and won the confidence of all ranks, a staunch confidence which made itself felt throughout the early and important history of the 28th in the field.

### TRAINING IN WINTER.

Training in Canada was a joy. Rushing the imaginary German trenches across snow-covered "Happyland" (one of the city of Winnipeg's many popular recreation grounds) was sport of the exhilarating order. Hoofing it along Portage to Deer Lodge with a "pack" which made the veterans of the regiment smile, was a pleasant

pastime—when the winds from the north were not too biting and the snow drifts out St. James' way had received the close attention of the city roadmen. Target shooting on the miniature range of the “ Little Black Devils ” at the Main Street Armoury savoured of a parlour game. It was just spadework, a fairly pleasant introduction to the great profession of a soldier.

### BOUND FOR THE FRONT.

Dame Rumour was ever a lying jade, but never more so than in those early days of the older Canadian battalions. Scarcely a week passed by but somebody told somebody else over the mess table that he had seen the orders for an immediate departure overseas—and within an hour, the commodious barracks on Colony Street would be afire with the “ fake ” story, bringing inevitable disappointment in its wake.

Final orders arrived about the middle of May and the battalion commenced a long-drawn-out farewell of the city. Before the end of the month Lieut.-Col. Embury and a full complement of officers and men entrained at the C.P.R. Depot in Winnipeg for Montreal. It was a memorable departure and the scenes of enthusiasm and warmly expressed goodwill of thousands of Manitobans towards their neighbours, will not be forgotten readily.

The 28th sailed ultimately, past old Quebec and out to sea. Good weather favoured the ocean trip, which was uneventful. As the transport approached the treacherous Irish Coast, swift destroyers of the British Navy came to her side and guarded her during the remainder of her journey to dock at Devonport.

### TRAINING IN ENGLAND.

The training of the 28th on English soil lasted from June to the middle of September, the battalion living under canvas at the famous Shorncliffe Camp. There they were inspected many times by British and Canadian generals. Historic days those were too, on which the Saskatchewan men, with other units of the 2nd Division,

## 4 THE STORY OF THE 28TH BATTALION.

marched past His Majesty the King, the late Field-Marshal Lord Kitchener, and Major-General Sir Sam Hughes, then Canada's War Minister. All made a magnificent showing. The men looked superb. Their bearing stamped them with the hall-mark of efficiency. They were ready for the field indeed.

### IN THE TRENCHES AT KEMMEL.

The battle of Loos, which began on September 26, 1915, marked the advent of the 2nd Canadian Division on the Western Front. To be precise, the 6th Brigade first went into the trenches on the night of September 25, the 28th and 29th Battalions relieving units of the Canadian Highland Brigade at Kemmel, south of Ypres.

The Kemmel trenches, scene of all the 28th's early activities in Flanders, had witnessed sanguinary fighting in the opening months of the war, and the little cemetery of wooden crosses near a picturesque and historic chateau behind the lines, bore silent testimony to the sacrifices of English and Scottish regiments in defence of a key position.

Nevertheless, no serious engagement had taken place in this sector for many months. The trenches—when the weather was dry—were passably good, and within a few weeks of Canadian occupation were equal to the best on the Flanders battle-line. In the work of improvement, the men of Colonel Embury's command played no small part.

Two events stand out in bold relief in the story of the 28th's activities at Kemmel—the explosion of two enemy mines beneath a company of Saskatoon men on the night of October 8, and a trench raid carried out by picked men of the battalion on the last night of January, 1916.

The former was extremely unfortunate in view of the fact that it occurred during the battalion's second tour of trench duty. The casualties played havoc with the strength of "D" Company, commanded by Major C. R. Hill, and included some of the most popular non-commissioned officers of the regiment. It was a rare

experience for an absolutely new battalion. Palpably aware of the fact that they were opposed by "green" troops, the German bombers left their trenches, expecting to find the 28th wiped out and incapable of any resistance. Thus deluding themselves, they made determined efforts to occupy the mine craters—but without avail. The new Canadians stood their ground and drove the enemy back with disconcerting and sustained rapid fire and a shower of hand grenades.

General coolness and distinctive heroism were evident throughout the battalion's trying experience, and Lieut. A. W. Northover, bombing officer, and Private Compton, of "B" Company, won the first decorations in the Division. Compton, since killed in action, showed gallantry of the highest order in rescuing some wounded comrades under a murderous fire, and was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal, while Lieut. Northover later received the Military Cross for fine leadership.

In the important raid carried out against the German trenches in the Spranbroekmolen salient in January, the 28th co-operated with the 29th Battalion of Vancouver in earning an enviable reputation for the 6th Brigade.

The objects of the raid were to obtain prisoners for purposes of identification, to destroy enemy works, to injure his morale and to kill—all in a minimum space of time. The operation was as cleanly executed as it was brilliantly conceived. The raiders of the 28th, led by their scout officer, Captain (now Lieut.-Col.) D. E. McIntyre, went over the parapet according to a carefully rehearsed plan and accomplished their work in record time. They entered the German trenches while the garrison was actually engaged in the process of relief, inflicting heavy casualties and securing several prisoners. To the disappointment of the raiding party, however, the latter were killed on the return journey across "No Man's Land." The Vancouver raiders were also very successful, and altogether the affair was considered a fine coup for the two battalions, which were bombarded with congratulations from Army, Corps and

Divisional chiefs, while their dash and enterprise were lauded by the war correspondents from the north to the south of the Allied front.

#### TRENCH WARFARE—FLANDERS MUD.

Throughout the early weeks of 1916 the battalion was engaged in regular tours of trench duty in the Kemmel sector, during which severe weather conditions made physical discomfort an ever-present bug-bear. But the men faced all their difficulties with characteristic doggedness and cheerfully ploughed their way through the slime and mud of the roads leading from their billets at Locre to the trenches. In those days casualties were not high, and the round dozen or so which occurred each tour were due principally to the alertness of the German snipers, who had our overland routes well covered. Canadian marksmen, too, proved their worth on many occasions, and the snipers of the 28th established a record which remained with the battalion throughout its history.

#### THE CRATER FIGHTING—ST. ELOI.

The really momentous history of the 28th may be said to have begun with the fighting for the craters of St. Eloi. April 3, 1916, marked the long-drawn-out struggle against an enemy already in possession of every possible advantage—in men, in artillery, in machine guns, and in reconnoitering facilities. Aeroplanes could hardly be said to have come into their own, and they played no conspicuous part in the operations.

Little need be said here of the events which flung the westerners into one of the most obscure engagements in the history of the present war.

The craters lay between the opposing front lines at St. Eloi, and were the result of a series of mines exploded by the British on March 27. From that day, when English troops of the 8th Division made a long-delayed attack upon the enemy, until the arrival of the Canadians on the scene a week later, the situation was never cleared up. Reconnaissance was carried out in face of unprecedented difficulties, and with little success. Both

sides of artillery kept up a continuous fire during all the intervening days, and attempts to gain definite information usually ended disastrously. It is almost certain that no British troops had taken over trenches with such bewildering "facts" in their possession before.

The brunt of the ordeal fell upon the 6th Brigade which undertook the relief of British regiments on the night of April 3-4, with the 27th and 31st Battalions in the front line, the 29th in support, and the 28th in reserve at Dickebusch.

The night of the relief was one of inky gloom, and raw with a damp, clammy cold, which pierced to the marrow. Moreover, the roads to the front line were extremely bad, and the reserve and support trenches were choked with mud.

The most terse description I have heard of the conditions which confronted the 6th Brigade at St. Eloi was that of a Canadian Staff Officer, an eye-witness, who reported to Divisional Headquarters that "our front line is no line at all. The men are unprotected and in mud and filth, and have to be relieved every twenty-four hours." To make things worse, many wounded still lay on the battlefield, and it fell to the lot of Canadian stretcher-bearers to remove as many as possible to the nearest dressing stations, usually overland, and through a storm of high explosive and shrapnel that never let up.

#### GERMANS ATTACK—28th AT VOORMEZEEL.

The enemy's first attack upon the positions of the Canadians began in the early morning of April 6, after a colossal concentration of artillery on a front of considerably less than a thousand yards. The 27th, 29th, and 31st Battalions were the sufferers, though isolated companies of each of these units fought the Germans with great heroism, heavily handicapped as they were. Meanwhile, the 28th had moved up from brigade reserve to the centre of the support line, the shell-wrecked village of Voormezeele, where they were

subjected to as severe a shelling as any experienced in the forward trenches.

In the evening of the 6th many heroic attempts were made to reconnoitre the area of the craters and the German front line, and in this work, officers and men of the 28th assisted gallantly—the efforts of Captain Styles of "B" Company, Captain L. M. Bidwell of "D" Company, and Lieuts. McIntosh and Rowlandson were particularly courageous if not productive of good. Several bombing parties were organised and ventured out into the "Unknown" in vain endeavours to reach parties of the 31st Battalion which were holding on with wonderful endurance in face of tremendous odds. In the van of these attacking parties went Lieut. Gerald D. Murphy, a young Saskatchewan bank clerk, who displayed grit of the highest orders throughout the fighting. Time and again Murphy and his band of bombers reached the craters and eventually succeeded in establishing posts in three of them. Another hero of that memorable night of the 6th was Captain Styles, a well-known figure in Saskatchewan football circles, who continually exposed himself, with a total disregard of his own skin, in an attempt to consolidate scattered units of the 28th and 31st.

Official reports of the doings of the battalion in the early morning of the 7th were brief and tragic. They serve only to emphasise the hopelessness of the situation that Colonel Embury and his men were up against. For instance, this one by the colonel himself:—"I told Captain Styles he was to come around north of the craters. He started off at 11.30 and left part of his men with Major Daly (31st Battalion). It was dark and raining hard, and we had never seen the ground before. The craters looked just like the ordinary ground (a morass). Styles went up and found Lieut. Murphy at 4 o'clock, but had no time to fix up for an attack. The men were all in; they had only had three hours' sleep in forty-eight."

Valorous conduct characterised every endeavour by the 28th men to carry out quickly changing orders

during two most critical nights, and though the casualties of the battalion were the least in the Brigade, the men from Saskatchewan played a big role.

The toll of the Brigade in killed, wounded and missing during this brief tour at St. Eloi was exceedingly high—617 officers and men.

### FINAL LOSS OF CRATERS.

After the relief of the 28th and the other units of the 6th Brigade was completed on April 8, fighting for the craters continued to be waged desperately and with varying success to Canadian arms. Battalions of the 4th and 5th Canadian Brigades each made brave attempts to oust the Germans from their positions, and ultimately succeeded in establishing themselves in two of the ill-fated craters. Their success, however, was short-lived. The end came—one might say suddenly—during the 6th Brigade's second tour. April 19 was the date, and the 29th (Vancouver) Battalion was most directly concerned. The enemy, smarting under the resolute and spirited methods of the Canadians, mustered all his available forces in men and guns for his greatest attack.

Two parties of the 29th held on to their positions in the craters until the last possible moment. Then the survivors of the garrison seemed to melt away under the shelling of the massed German artillery and the murderous fire of many machine guns. The final assault of the blue-grey masses of infantry was delivered only upon a sadly depleted band of survivors, most of whom were taken prisoners. One or two lived through to get back to their own lines and tell a wonderful epic of their comrades' gallant stand, of how they clung in desperation to the filthy mire of the craters and struggled to work the few remaining rifles which were not buried or smashed by shell fire.

### HORRORS OF HOOGH.

Up to the end of May, 1916, the fortunes of the Battalion had fluctuated, for though they had suffered severely in October, 1915, through the enemy's mining

## 10 THE STORY OF THE 28TH BATTALION.

activities at Kemmel, their part in the St. Eloi engagement was attended with comparatively light casualties. In their next action, however, the battle of Hooge, on June 6, they suffered even worse losses than those sustained by the other battalions of the Brigade in April. Two companies, "A" and "B," were all but wiped out—the former being victims of more German mines, while the latter came under one of the most terrific enemy bombardments of the war. The 6th was the blackest day in the history of the unit, and while the casualties in the ranks were exceptionally high, some of the noblest and most experienced officers were lost. These included Captains Milne and McGovern, of "A" Company, both killed.

The Germans attacked in overwhelming force and carried the Canadian line, despite a most gallant and heroic resistance during which the Battalion machine gunners inflicted heavy losses upon the advancing masses until they were finally surrounded, overcome, and taken prisoners.

## OFF TO THE SOMME.

While peace and quiet had reigned at Ypres in those latter months of Canadian occupation, history was being made on another part of the far-flung British line. Dominion Day, 1916, witnessed the smashing prelude to that prolonged series of hard-fought engagements known as the battle of the Somme. Two months later, almost to the day, the Canadian Corps entered the new arena of conflict.

Departure from the depressing atmosphere and filthy mud of Flanders gave rise to no regrets among the rank and file of the 6th Brigade, who marched away for a short period of rest and training near to the pretty French town of St. Omer, on the closing days of August, 1916. All were delighted with thoughts of new experiences ahead. The Somme was to provide them with their first opportunity of coming to close grips with the Germans on fair terms.

PREPARATIONS—INDIVIDUAL  
RESPONSIBILITY.

Few of the 28th men who survived the battle will forget the feverish days of early September, when so much had to be learned in a minimum space of time, when so much was crowded into the few days of so-called indulgence, when the men seized eagerly every opportunity of acquainting themselves with the many details of a big offensive. It was a new feature to explain minutely the exact meaning of plans and objectives to every man-jack of the regiment. It was a newer feature to inform the humblest private that in the heat of battle he may be called upon to fill the place of some fallen senior, to command his section, to rally his platoon or even to lead his company. Yet initiative is the Canadian soldier's strong suit, and the new order of things, as emphasised in person by the Corps Commander, Lieut.-Gen. Sir Julian Byng, came as second nature.

## BEFORE COURCELETTE.

Within a few days of arriving in the Somme valley, the 2nd Canadian Division was called upon to move up to the battle-front to the relief of the senior division of the Corps. A new and greater British attack was impending. The Canadians were to take part, and the Canadians this time meant principally the 2nd Canadian Division. British troops were to co-operate on the flanks.

The main objective of the Canadian infantry was to be the village of Courcelette, a heap of ruins, but a dominant factor in the German defence line and the key to the strong hostile positions beyond it. The capture of the village was to be accomplished in two swift, bold strokes. The first of these embraced the heavily manned approaches to Courcelette—a task allotted to the 6th Brigade—and the Sugar-Factory, south of the village, believed to harbour numerous nests of Boche machine gunners. The latter stroke was assigned to the 4th Canadian Brigade, commanded by Brigadier-Gen. Rennie. Upon the decisive carrying out of this dual

operation depended the success of the battalions of the 5th Canadian Brigade, which were to storm Courcelette.

The date selected for the attack was September 15th—the first anniversary of the 2nd Division's arrival in France.

Preparations for the advance were very thorough, and the 28th went into the fight with light hearts, confident, cool as seasoned veterans. On the night of September 14th they left their bivouac in the "Brickfields" of Albert for their assembly trenches, dug under heavy shell fire by their comrades of the 29th Vancouver Battalion.

By 4.20 in the morning of the 15th the attacking units of the 6th Brigade, 27th on the right, 28th on the left, were ready for action and straining at the leash. Zero, or the signal for the advance, was timed for 6.20 a.m. There were two hours to linger in suspense, but never were troops more cheery than these westerners about to go "over the top" for the first time. On the left of them were the 5th Canadian Mounted Rifles, attacking on the 3rd Division front. On both flanks again, Canadian units linked up with British regiments co-operating in the offensive.

#### THE BARRAGE—WEATHER CONDITIONS.

The bombardment which paved the way for the assaulting waves of Canadians was a triumph for the British artillery. Every detail had been planned to perfection. Every "heavy" had its special objective and its own time table, working hand-in-hand with the infantry, concentrating on the enemy's trenches and strong points, barraging his lines of communication, co-operating with our aeroplanes to reach out to distant targets. All barked out on schedule time, 6.20; then the 28th and their companion units commenced to move forward. The very conditions overhead—a clear sky, and bright—augured well. The successive waves advanced towards the Germans with inspired confidence. Not quite as if on parade, but nearly so, they covered that shell-pocked "No Man's Land," which they had

never seen before, in the face of a hail of bullets which came from skilfully concealed batteries of the Germans. Here and there inevitable gaps appeared, but the men pushed on towards their goal.

By 7.40 a.m., every objective had been gained—and gained beyond all doubt—and the 28th, with their Winnipeg neighbours, the 27th, were established in the main line of the enemy before Courcelette. Casualties were not heavy on the whole, but rather severe in some companies which encountered outlaw enemy machine gun posts in a sunken road—one of many in these parts. From these positions the German fire was especially deadly, and the success of the operation looked in jeopardy for a time. Two platoons of "C" Company of the 28th were directly concerned, and only the splendid initiative and resource of their commander, Captain Bredin, and two non-commissioned officers, saved the whole from annihilation. Methodically and with great coolness a party of bombers was organised to rush to the rear of the German hive—a very formidable strong point—and surprise the defiant gunners. The scheme worked magnificently, and a deadly shower of bullets poured from Canadian rifles into the nest of Boches. Their commander, a Prussian, was killed outright, and, in a trice, the entire party threw up their hands in abject surrender.

From this juncture no further reverses ensued, and the battalion proceeded to consolidate their gains.

Advanced posts were pushed out towards, and even into, the village of Courcelette, and the enemy's reserve strength was gauged by skilful and daring reconnaissance by battalion and company scouts. Meanwhile, the 4th Infantry Brigade, on the right, had also gained their objectives with comparative ease, overrunning the Sugar Refinery south-west of Courcelette and establishing a strong line of outposts on the fringe of the village. Twelve hours later—in the early evening of the 15th—the whole of Courcelette was brilliantly stormed by battalions of the 5th Canadian Brigade, whose task was made easy by the success of the 4th and 6th.

## 14 THE STORY OF THE 28TH BATTALION.

Fierce engagements between Canadian bombers and isolated bands of Germans continued throughout the afternoon and evening of the 15th with invariable success to the Canadian infantrymen.

The 28th thus shared substantially in one of the greatest Canadian victories—a splendid triumph for General Turner's fine division. The battalion may well be proud of their achievement, though grieving at the loss of some of their best-loved officers and men. Captain F. W. Oliver and Lieuts. Heath, McGibbon and Oldershaw all fell during the action, while the wounded included Lieuts. A. B. Smith, Walsh, and McConnell.

The battalion was relieved on the night of the 15th, and marched towards Albert and rest billets for a period of recuperation.

Early in October, however, they were back in the line and taking an active part in the operations of the 2nd Division in the maze of trenches north and north-east of Courcelette with conspicuous success. On being finally relieved they started a long journey in search of new fields to conquer.

### ON SOUCHEZ FRONT—REINFORCEMENTS.

After the Somme fighting the 28th made their third great move, this time northwards, and entered a sector where they were destined to spend many months, which they were to learn to know even better than the Ypres Salient. The last weeks of October, 1916, found them in the trenches before the redoubtable Vimy Ridge, on the Souchez front. The new trenches afforded the depleted ranks welcome relief—after Courcelette. They were strangely quiet. Heavy shelling was seldom experienced, and even the rifle and machine gun fire was subdued and spasmodic. Snipers reaped their usual harvest on both sides, and the specialists of the Canadian battalions found many opportunities of exploiting their prowess, notably in periodical raids on the enemy trenches.

Reinforcements began to arrive in batches and vacancies occasioned during September were quickly filled

with well-trained officers and men who came up to the traditional standard.

The advent of a spell of cold weather in November witnessed a revival of the accustomed artillery activity and the German long-range guns fired hundreds of rounds daily into the back areas of the Canadian Corps. The enemy was awake again and utilizing his commanding view of the British lines from his pet stronghold.

### PREPARING FOR BATTLE.

Much was accomplished by all the Canadian battalions during those early months of their occupation of the Souchez trenches. Throughout the winter they were busily engaged in harassing the Germans on Vimy Ridge. Trench raids became more frequent and almost as popular as pay days. The new Canadians took to them as well as the veterans had done in the Salient. From small enterprises involving perhaps a dozen men, they developed into well-organized operations in which a hundred or even a whole company took active part. Their sporting element appealed to every son of the West and keen rivalry sprang up between the various units. The Germans opposed to them were in a continual "blue funk" and sleepless nights must have been the order among the Hun garrison.

Yet the sum total of all the work done by the Canadians from October to April is bound up in one most glorious chapter of history—the story of Vimy Ridge.

### DESCRIPTION OF THE RIDGE—A BULWARK.

Vimy—most famous of the series of commanding ridges which the Germans held—was an inland "Heligoland." A narrow, irregular stretch of elevation extending some 8,000 yards over the plains of a once-flourishing countryside, it had been converted into an apparently invincible fortress. Indeed, British and French armies had already combined in pitting their forces against it on repeated occasions; but in vain. Its slopes were honeycombed with a maze of trenches of superb construction, made to withstand the most intense as-

saults of the opposing artillery. It contained dugouts wonderful in creation, fashioned by past masters in the art of tunnelling—some were capable of sheltering half a battalion of infantry. Its fortified caves of great depth and breadth gave room and comfort to strong garrisons who credited themselves with complete immunity from hostile shells. Its machine gun fortresses of concrete were models of strength.

To capture this masterpiece of military ingenuity seemed an almost superhuman task. It was the biggest thing that British troops had been called upon to carry out up to this time. How Canadians came to be selected to do the job is now a matter of history.

#### PRODUCTIVE RECONNAISSANCE—SPLENDID ARTILLERY.

Preparations for the battle were extensive, yet limited space forbids any attempt to describe the ramifications of the training of the men between February and April. Suffice it is to say that every inch of the ground was known to the Canadian staffs, and the infantry were able to visualize the task ahead of them from the many plans and diagrams, photographs, and taped courses over which companies and platoons practised their parts in the attack.

The preliminary work of the Canadian artillery was perfect. Every gun in the area of the Canadian Corps fired on the German defences in concert. Formidable entanglements of coiled barbed wire were pulverised and a clean passage made for the assaulting troops. Parapets crumbled under the British shells. Dugouts which had been built for permanencies rose in the air in fragments when the "heavies" from the Canadian side landed upon them. The strength of the Hun garrisons dwindled under the intense fire. The pride of Prince Rupprecht's Bavarian army was shattered. Such was the achievement of the artillery before Vimy Ridge.

## WEATHER CONDITIONS—THE 28TH'S SHARE.

April 9th—one of the greatest days in Canadian history—brought a conglomeration of weather conditions. A cloudy, threatening dawn with early rain about zero hour, followed by sleet and snow. Later came spasmodic sunshine, then more rain and a cold wind from the north-west.

The 28th had moved into their battle positions on the night of April 8 by way of Mont St. Eloi and the village of Aux Rietz to the southern vicinity of Neuville St. Vaast, a march of  $4\frac{1}{2}$  miles. Having acquitted themselves so well in all previous engagements the Saskatchewan men, now commanded by Lieut.-Col. Alex. Ross of Regina, were assigned a memorable task, including the capture of the village of Thelus on the western slopes of the Ridge—only blackened ruins, but the converging point of several important trench lines and believed to be alive with machine guns. Thelus trench, running into the village on the northern side, was allotted to the 29th Battalion.

It was about the ruins of Thelus that the principal fighting by the 28th took place. The advance across "No-Man's Land," though the going was rendered difficult by sleet and rain, was, in the words of a western officer, a picnic. There were casualties, of course, due to machine gun fire from the German front line and supports, but there was no stopping the Canadians who advanced to their objectives with even greater confidence than at Courcelette. By 9 a.m. the assaulting waves had reached the enemy trenches near the Lens-Arras road, which had been carried by the 4th Canadian Brigade earlier in the attack, and were deploying about a hundred yards in front, awaiting the moving forward of the barrage for the main assault on Thelus. By this time also, the 1st Royal West Kents and 1st King's Own Scottish Borderers of the 13th British Brigade had formed up on the left of the northern flank. At 9.35 the barrage lifted and the infantry went forward as close to it as possible. Twenty

minutes later, "B" Company of the 28th, in the lead, had carried the western end of Thelus village in face of a poor resistance, and three white "Very" lights, soaring skywards, told the eager watchers at headquarters that Thelus trench had fallen before the men of Vancouver—the 29th.

Such marked success at a minimum cost was the best possible incentive to young troops, and the remaining objectives were reached and conquered with elan. The centre of Thelus was taken by "D" Company, working with "B" Company of the 31st Battalion, and by 10.40 it was known that "C" Companies of the same two battalions had won the eastern end of the village, while the 29th had established themselves on the lower end of Hill 135, on the south-eastern spur of the Ridge, and in Thelus Wood. A grand triumph for the Brigade.

Half-an-hour later every intermediate objective had been gained, and "A" Company of the 28th were actually engaged in consolidating a main line of resistance.

### OBSTINATE HUN GUNNERS.

Feeble as were the main efforts of the Germans to stem the dashing Canadian infantry, some sections of the latter encountered parties of obstinate Hun machine gunners and bombers at Thelus, and lively hand-to-hand exchanges took place, usually ending in the complete annihilation of the Boches or abject surrender to our men.

### COMPLETE VICTORY—THE SPOILS.

Shortly after midday on the 9th the Brigade's task was completed—the "Iron Sixth" had enhanced their reputation gloriously. The 27th Winnipeg Battalion and the 29th, following up the successes of their comrades, swept over the crest of the Ridge and captured the Bois de la Ville and the village and wood of Farbus, and pushed out patrols even beyond their allotted limits. On the left and right flanks, too, complete victory

rested with Canadian and British arms, and the possession of Germany's greatest bulwark on the Western front passed to Canada's citizen army. Over four thousand prisoners were captured in the battle, including those who fell to the 4th Canadian Division in a succeeding operation at "The Pimple," at the northern end of the Ridge, which alone had resisted successfully on the 9th, and many guns of every calibre, large stores of ammunition and bombs, and the paraphernalia of war. The trophies of the 6th Brigade alone included a thousand prisoners, fourteen guns and howitzers, a large trench mortar on wheels, and 25,000 rounds of gun ammunition. Many of these have now crossed the Atlantic, priceless additions to Canada's ever-growing collection.

The real fruits of the great conquest of Vimy Ridge were reaped, however, after the Canadians had gone. The change of ownership had far-reaching effects, and for the first time British troops were able to scan the great rolling plain of Douai, to observe the enemy in his haunts and to strike sledge-hammer blows at his strength, resulting at length in his retirement to prepared positions along the famous Hindenburg line. So productive was Canada's triumph on that cheerless April day.

#### ATTACK AT LENS—28TH IN SUPPORT.

Operating in close support to battalions in attack is no holiday. It demands exercise of the sterner qualities in the troops who undertake it—of application, of strenuous endeavour, of untiring energy, of doggedness and coolness, and heroism.

Such qualities were displayed by the men of the 28th in their next important action, in front of Lens, where they helped to make successful a further offensive operation of the 6th Brigade in August, 1917.

In July, the Battalion had moved up from the Vimy sector of the line towards the mining town of Lens, held by the Germans, and ostensibly in danger of becoming encircled by the Canadians, who had launched a

powerful and successful attack against its strongly-fortified approaches and suburbs on August 15—Hill 70. This attack had resulted in the downfall of the formidable defences of Hill 70, which resisted the British attack in the battle of Loos in September, 1915, and had since that time been improved by every method and device known to the enemy. The operations of August 21 in which the 28th played such a prominent part were a continuation of the excellent work commenced by regiments of another Canadian Division on the earlier date, and were equally successful.

The attack was delivered in the early morning from the direction of Cite St. Elizabeth on the north and Cite du Moulin on the south-east, two of the most important of the environs of the mining town. It began under unusual circumstances. The Germans had intended counter-attacking at exactly the same time, and the trenches at the edge of Lens were full of troops. Their first wave of infantry started from the north simultaneously with the Canadians, and the opposing forces met in "No Man's Land." A fierce struggle followed. The Germans did not realise their situation until the Canadians were upon them—it was a misty morning and barely light—and before they could rally against the shock they were being bayoneted and split into little groups. Their officers tried to make them stand, and some of the Germans fought quite stubbornly, but they were pressed back into the trenches they had left and among the reserve battalions massed there to follow up the first attack. The Canadians scrambled on the parapet, where the men grappled with each other and flung bombs into the crowded alleyways below. Parties of still bewildered Germans sought to retreat down the communication trenches, but they were also choked with troops and the casualties inflicted on this confused mass of fugitives were exceedingly high.

The operations of the 6th Brigade, in which the 28th behaved with great dash and gallantry, though engaged in support to the 27th and 29th, were directed against two unusually strong German positions known as Nun's

Alley and Cinnabar trench. Both were held in formidable force by the enemy and only fighting of the most desperate description finally gained the day for the Canadians. At various times the attacking parties were in difficulties which threatened the ultimate success of the advance, but characteristic resource and pluck pulled the game out of the fire, and the men of Winnipeg and Vancouver reached their objectives after paying a heavy toll in officers and men.

One platoon of the 28th, termed the "Piccaninnies" on account of their extremely youthful appearance, especially distinguished themselves during the action and earned the plaudits of the whole Brigade. The intention had been, so says the official narrative, to keep them in reserve as much as possible, but circumstances forced them into the limelight, where they played their part like veterans.

The gallantry of each company which took part was in keeping with the traditions of the battalion, and the commanding officers of those units to which they gave their support paid eloquent testimony to their efforts. "The conditions obtaining throughout the action," says Lieut. O'Brien, who commanded "A" Company, "were characterised by the most intense activity on all sides, and I can say no more than that the conduct of all was worthy of the best traditions of the 28th North West Battalion."

#### A SUDDEN CHANGE.

The Canadian divisions had hardly returned to normal conditions of trench warfare after the August fighting before Lens than they were called upon hurriedly to move north again—this time to Flanders and their old haunts.

Since the lull in the great spring offensive on the Arras front British armies had been hammering at the Germans on the Flanders front, striking quick, vigorous blows at positions which the enemy had begun to regard as impregnable. The Messines ridge, scene of Canadian activities in 1915 and 1916, was the first to fall, stormed

and won by English and Australian infantry. Then the ridges further north beyond Ypres, until by the end of October one alone remained to be conquered, the last and most formidable—the ridge of Passchendaele, possession of which would give the Allies the whip handle in that part of the country, with observation of almost the entire German-occupied plains of Western Flanders.

Already attempts had been made to capture this second "Vimy Ridge," but all had been doomed to failure, and even the straggling, rugged spurs which branched out westwards towards the British lines had defied the efforts of British and Colonial regiments. It seemed meet and right that the Canadian Corps should be called from Lens at last to pitt its strength against the enemy in an area sacred to the memory of so many valorous Canadian sons.

About the middle of October the younger Divisions, the 3rd and 4th, left the slag heaps south of Loos, post haste for Ypres. On the 26th day of the month they fought a magnificent action, side by side, in which they carried the redoubtable Bellevue Spur, the key to Passchendaele and the Ridge, and sustained the reputation of Canadian infantrymen as storm troops. Besides paving the way for the culminating and successful attack by the two senior Canadian divisions ten days later.

#### PASSCHENDAELE—A GERMAN PRIZE.

The village of Passchendaele—included in the conquest of the 2nd Canadian Division in early November—could boast little but charred ruins. An eye-witness correspondent, describing its appearance during the morning of the battle, wrote as follows: "As I saw it this morning through the smoke of gun fire and a wet mist, it was less than I had seen before, a week or two ago, with just one ruin there—the ruin of its church—a black mass of slaughtered masonry and nothing else; not a house left, not a huddle of brick on that shell-swept height.

Passchendaele Ridge had to be held at all costs against Canadians or anybody else. Hindenburg himself had decreed that it was to be defended to the last drop of blood, and if taken, was to be recaptured at whatever price in lives. To check our progress, the enemy had devised new systems of defence and built concrete block-houses or "pill-boxes" in echelon formation, and at every cross-roads and in every bit of village or farmstead.

Against such a bulwark the men of the 28th advanced to the attack in the early morning of November 6. As at the battle of Courcelette, they operated on the extreme left of the 6th Brigade front, the 31st Alberta Battalion on their right, the 2nd Brigade of the 1st Canadian Division on their left. The ground which lay between the assembly trenches and their objective was wet and swampy. In places the storming parties, moving forward in group formation, ploughed through the morass knee-deep. Farther on, they floundered to the waist while hostile airmen swooped down and poured machine gun bullets into their midst.

Undismayed, however, the men pushed on, cleaning up German trenches as they advanced towards the crest of the Ridge, and attacking the treacherous "pill-box" fortresses from the flanks.

By 7.40 a.m. the battalion had reached the goal of their operations and added another glorious page to Saskatchewan history. The 27th of Winnipeg had also won and commenced to consolidate a new front line beyond the crest of Passchendaele, and the attacking waves of the 31st were well on their way to complete the triumph.

In the early afternoon success was assured for the Brigade's third vital engagement in six months. Over two hundred prisoners were taken, while the captured trophies included one minenwerfer and sixteen machine guns, which were used with deadly effect upon the retiring enemy.

Passchendaele was won—at the first attempt—and to the 6th Brigade fell the chief honours. 'Twas their

## 24 THE STORY OF THE 28TH BATTALION.

crowning triumph of a most successful year of campaigning, and one can feel with Brigadier-General Ketchen, who had commanded the westerners throughout their history, and who, in a glowing tribute to his men, confessing that his words could ill describe the magnitude of their efforts, said : "It is impossible for me to do justice to the determination, initiative and gallantry displayed by all ranks, who were well aware of the difficulties of the situation, but met their many hardships with the utmost cheerfulness, outstanding spirit and high courage, which carried them through a memorable day and once again proved their fighting superiority over the enemy."

Once again the 28th—with their comrades of the "Iron Sixth"—had set a notable example of gallantry and endurance. And the story of the Battalion's deeds does not stop at Passchendaele—though no more may be written here of their doings. Soon they returned to their old positions south of Lens, where they spent another winter campaign and assisted in holding the coveted Vimy Ridge against the great onslaughts of the enemy in March of the present year. During all these months, the high traditions of the regiment were maintained and signal honours were gained from time to time by heroes from the great North-West.

